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AUTHOR Hanson, J. Robert
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ABSTRACT

The author lists the pros and cons of behavioral objectives and of accountability systems requiring an objectives-based curriculum before presenting some brief notes on the controversy surrounding objectives-based instruction and describing the use of behavioral objectives in certain states. He concludes with nine recommendations concerning the use and development of behavioral objectives in New Jersey. (IRT)

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# The Use and Abuse of Objectives in Certain State Accountability Programs

A Background Paper

J. Robert Hanson

*Introduction:*

*Those persons and agencies attacking the use of behavioral objectives in public education generally do so in light of fully justified criticisms of such objectives construction as is improperly conceived, or inadequately prepared. Such a critical stance may in many cases be an advocate position. In any event it is a contribution to the development of the technology. The summarization of positions for and against objectives addresses, however, positions of a more philosophical nature. This listing should be interpreted on the basis of each of the adversary positions assuming that the objectives technology in question represented some optimal expression of the art.*

| Pros | Cons |
|---|---|
| 1. Without objectives there is no way to identify a common core of essential skills for all students. | 1. That the use of objectives overwhelms the teacher with the minutia of instructional detail such that central concepts are obscured. |
| 2. Without objectives there is no way to demonstrate the achievement or mastery of predetermined skills. | 2. That the use of objectives overwhelms the teacher with paper work. |
| 3. Without an objectives technology there is no way to convert broadly stated goals into instructional segments, procedures or criteria for accomplishment. | 3. That the number of objectives necessary for the implementation of a complete curriculum would make the system unmanageble. |
| 4. Without an objectives technology there is no uniform way to develop performance criteria or test items. | 4. That some parents have expressed concern that the introduction of "behavioral objectives" presages behavior modification. |
| 5. Without objectives there are fewer ways to communicate with the public about pupil achievement. | |



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6. *Without objectives (of many types) there are no generally known technologies for stipulating performance expectations across all levels of professional personnel (e.g., administrative, curriculum, instructional, as well as learner).*

7. *Without an objectives-based system there are far fewer ways of standardizing school reporting systems.*

8. *Without objectives there is no way to determine if all children achieved certain minimal skills, i.e., the issue is whether minority children, for example, should be expected to achieve comparably with less disavantaged student populations.*

9. *Without objectives there are far fewer mechanisms for focusing on the use and interpretations of test data (i.e., the existence of well conceived and prepared objectives makes possible the construction of valid and reliable test items).*

10. *That the existence of objectives in critical content areas focuses on outcomes, not processes, and provides the basis for both accountability and professional self-improvement.*

11. *The utility and validity of test item construction depends on approved and predetermined statements of objectives and their performance levels.*

5. *That there has been too little congruence between the statement of approved goals and the development of objectives for the classroom, i.e., the criticism is of low validity for the objective's relationship to the larger goal.*

6. *That the use of objectives has been restricted to teachers and not applied to other levels of personnel, e.g., superintendents, principals, supervisors, etc., i.e., that the system of accountability is being applied unfairly.*

7. *That existing objective sources (banks, computer-access systems, etc.) are largely restricted to low level cognitive objectives and largely overlook objectives in other domains as well as objectives requiring higher order thinking skills.*

8. *That the use of objectives tends to make the instructional system rigid, i.e., over-shadowing the need for flexibility, and failing to recognize that there are varieties of teaching and learning styles.*

9. *That many objectives are so detailed and picayune as to be irrelevant to the larger learning task.*

10. *That the construction of objectives introduces contentiousness over the setting of student performance levels, and makes adversaries of the partners in the educational enterprise.*

11. That if and when objectives technology is employed that it be restricted to output or product measures, and not instructional procedures or process type concerns.

12. That objectives should not be used unless they are a component of a larger more comprehensive planning and evaluation system.

13. That the existence of large numbers of objectives (regardless of how well conceived or prepared) may tend to encourage complacency in instruction.

14. That the use of objectives preempts aspects of the special relation between the teacher and student, the special diagnostic and prescriptive task, and that it focuses on the minutiae of instruction instead of the larger gestalt.

On a secondary level there are also pros and cons on the implementation of accountability systems requiring an objectives-based curriculum. These are largely issues of representation in the objectives construction process and are critical concerns for the smooth implementation of any objectives-based system.

Pros

1. That broad representation on the objectives selection teams provides for "ownership" of the ensuing results.

2. That the local superintendent can facilitate the development of accountability procedures by inviting local organizational representation as well as community residents and administrative staff (i.e., the issue here is that teacher involvement alone is no protection against that accusation that

Cons

1. That objectives construction committees do not fairly represent the teachers' position(s).

2. That the reasons for using objectives are not adequately explained, i.e., that the need for objectives is a fait accompli without the involvement of classroom personnel.

*the local teachers' organization was not represented*

3. *That the construction of the objectives committees can be divided as re: terminal achievements, and grade-level achievements (e.g., broad citizen involvement could be present for the identification, selection or construction of school exit level minimal skills, and the professional community on a grade by grade skill levels group'*

4. *That committees can be selected for determinations of where process as well as product objectives may be necessary.*

5. *That the preparation/selection of objectives by particular content areas allows for community representation on the basis of the entry-level skills required (i.e., as particularly germane to higher order and vocationally oriented subject matter).*

6. *That the state seize the initiative in proposing a format for the construction of objectives, and making provision for training.*

3. *That the objectives writing process is a demanding and time consuming one and that teachers should rather be allowed to select from existing and approved banks.*

4. *That if there must be objectives that they be restricted to product and not process statements.*

5. *That such objectives as are selected or prepared not be made mandatory before extensive field-testing for validity, cultural, ethnic, sexual and geographic bias.*

6. *That local teachers not be made to produce objectives without a state-approved model or format for same.*

7. *That objectives writing/selection or evaluation teams not include representatives of the local community on the basis that the task is a professional one.*

*Some Process Notes on the Controversy*

*Attacking the technology of objectives-based instruction is a more socially acceptable way of voicing fear of being held accountable. Since accountability, per se, is an expression of the public's right-to-know, and since the weakest link in the technology of instruction is the statement of objectives, it is the objective that is the brunt of the criticism of the unworkableness of the accountability concept. The problem is that to date there is no alternative to the use of some form of performance objective. Certain teachers' organizations are on record as opposing the required use of objectives but cannot offer a workable substitute. The issue, then, becomes one of the state recognizing their legitimate objections (and there are many), and simultaneously involving them*

representatively in the construction or selection process using the best of existing technology.

Simultaneously the technology of objectives production, and the objectives-banks resources, have matured considerably in the last few years such that the state of the art can, with careful implementation, satisfactorily address most of the implementation difficulties. The state of art does not, of course, address the underlying philosophical issue of professionalism as conceived by at least one national teachers' organization.

Consequences of the Use of Behavioral Objectives in Certain Key States

Some 39 states, as of a recent survey, have adopted one system or another utilizing objectives as an aspect of introducing accountability procedures. Many different terms are used for these two basic phenomena but the plot is the same. Florida and Texas, for example, use objectives in the math and communications areas in grades K-9 as a way to evaluate teacher performance, a la pupil scores in those areas. This has the advantage of allowing the pupil to know how well all students are progressing in certain key areas. These objectives sets, however, are not the whole curriculum but only those aspects over which demonstrable student achievement is deemed essential. Presently, they are working on objectives in other areas and at the 10-12 levels.

California and Colorado discovered that they had moved too quickly to implement an accountability system heavily dependent on objectives, and as a result of rigorous objection have retreated to consider alternatives.

Michigan and Florida have probably done more than most other states to implement accountability systems, although Michigan is the only state that announces its program as such.

Michigan has 22 state-approved goals with ten sets of objectives in the cognitive area, three sets in the management area, and none for the remaining nine goal areas. They followed a process wherein there was large public involvement in goal setting; then professional educators (including representatives from organizations) converted 13 of the goals into objectives statements. These objectives were then converted to assessment tests in reading and math. They believe that measurement should be restricted to student output, and that any process concerns should rather be included in a statement of philosophy. They believe that measurements of success must be based on test data responsive to predetermined objectives, and not on multiple "perceptions" of need or accomplishment. In the developmental stages of testing they discovered, as has New Jersey, that the districts did not, by and large, know how to make effective use of the test data.

Ironically, Michigan has no requirements that LEAs submit objectives. The state does, of course, test against the minimal but approved objectives which are available to the districts. Naturally, Michigan's testing program is objectives-referenced.

Finally, Michigan having initially involved large numbers of educators and having produced myriad objectives decided that a better approach would have been to prepare an approved format for the writing of objectives and then use more selectively appointed committees to prepare and disseminate core objectives. They recommended against encouraging districts to prepare their own core objectives on the basis that there is not only great redundancy in effort (and the waste that entails), but also that there was no way, district to district, to standardize output.

Florida prepared its objectives through extensive local district(s) involvement. One of the first and unusual lessons learned was that when teachers are a part of the construction process they overproduce, thus virtually

burying the system in micro-objectives. Florida believes that the involvement of the public in the preparation of "priority" or core objectives might have been a better procedure. They found it difficult to communicate to the public the essence of the teacher-prepared objectives.

Areas for testing have been limited to date to reading, writing, and math. Objectives against which assessment items were prepared were approved by a committee of 40% educators and 60% consumers. Some 35 representatives passed on the first draft of the priority objectives, and then the listing was submitted to all the Florida school advisory committees. These latter committees are predominantly composed of lay people.

Florida believes that a minimal time line for the introduction of an accountability system is three years. The system as it now operates is in its fifth year. In their current efforts they are proposing that objectives be prepared on a terminal level for grades 10, 11, and 12 with extensive community sign-off, and that on the lower levels (grades 3, 5, and 8) with involvement from the broader educational community. All their testing activities are limited to product or student outcome measures.

Missouri has taken the route of prescribing goals primarily for the mastery of "life skills". Testing is largely directed to how well the youngster can demonstrate those skills necessary to succeeding in the world after graduation.

Oregon has adopted the Florida system of using test data on pupil achievement, not so much for teacher evaluation but rather as a system for improving the state's management capabilities.

*Summary*

*In any approach to the use of objectives New Jersey is well advised to heed the advice of other states. This experience can largely be capsulized in the following recommendations:*

1. *The community should be involved in objectives-setting as that process reflects terminal skills, and not in the incremental developmental steps.*
2. *That regardless of the method selected for appointing people to the committees for the preparation and/or selection of objectives that there first be a state-approved format for objectives construction.*
3. *That where and when possible the state make provisions for needed training in the selection and writing of objectives.*
4. *That the preparation and approval of objectives be seen as one aspect of the greater need for comprehensive planning.*
5. *That whatever objectives emerge from the districts be illustrated by examples and sample test items.*
6. *That the SEA review said objectives for congruence with the state's goals.*
7. *That the coversion of approved objectives on the district level be closely monitored by the state as they are converted into test items.*
8. *That if local autonomy surfaces as the key political issue in a state that the SEA content itself with whatever terminal objectives emerge as a result of representative community involvement.*
9. *That the state not recognize any organization as the bargaining unit for professional groups, but rather that the local*

*superintendent issue such invitations to committees as he sees fit, and that the local bargaining unit(s) be invited to send representatives in proportion to their responsibilities in the instructional system.*

*Postscript*

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